

# Christiana Soulou

## *Tarot*

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Christiana Soulou's new series of drawings explores the centuries-old phenomenon of the tarot. Soulou has described the appeal of tarot cards as their iconographical variety and the depth of their ideas and connotations. Each card has its name, and each name shadows forth an allegorical subject: the Fool, the Emperor, Justice, Death. The consolidation of such a diverse ensemble within the compendious form of the card deck results in a curious duality of heterogeneity and coherence.

The images of the tarot cards are complex allegories which may appear inscrutable to the modern observer but which were embedded in the visual imagination of Renaissance societies.

The study and decipherment of the tarot are often similar in methodology to the painstaking, piece-by-piece approach of detectives in crime novels, relying on revelatory assortment of apparently insignificant details. Numerous theories have been advanced as to the cards' meanings, reflecting the fact that they draw upon a mixture of different civilizations and popular traditions. The tarot amounts to a crossroads of influences, cultures, traditions, history, and philosophy – notably Humanism.

Consider the legend of the *Papesse Jeanne*, popularised through the illustrations of 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century books, which we rediscover in the illustrations of tarot cards. Or the Humanist scholar Petrarch's poem 'Trionfi' ('Triumphs') (1352-1357), inspired by the idea of a triumphant procession, which contains the images of Death, the Chariot or Love that are also found in the tarot.

Soulou's underlying fascination is the way in which, within the concrete system of the tarot game, the different elements betray the absolute ambiguity of meaning, significance and definition; her work hence taps into deconstructionist theories of language. She evinces those common essential features between the tarot's figures that bely their nominal differentiation. Furthermore, her work is a metaphorical critique of human traits and foibles, an examination of characters and the formulation of 'character'. Soulou attempts to show what constitutes the difference that shapes every character into its own unique form. In Soulou's story, the Fool is wise, the Emperor is foolish, and the Hermit is a fool.

For all further inquiries please contact the press office at [pressoffice@bernier-eliades.gr](mailto:pressoffice@bernier-eliades.gr) or on +30 210 34 13 937. The gallery remains open Tue- Fri, 10:30 – 20:00 and Sat, 12:00 – 16:00

Carte (translation: map or card in French), an ambiguous word: what it gains in nobility on the side of geography, it immediately loses on the side of the game that uses and names the object - the phrase "the playing card" isn't far from being something immoral. And therefore it follows that it is sinful, attractive, captivating, fatal; don't forget the Queen of Spades. Condemned all the same in the end. And besides, what is a playing card? Paper, of perishable material, nothing more. There, perhaps, is the origin of a more general contempt which relates from this piece of paper to society or more exactly to the class which produced it. For a long time, historians and collectors have not wanted to see in the playing card anything but popular stereotypes. Not all however. Because leaving aside the evil of the passion and drama of the game, the card is a mystery, from which flows abundant literature covering more than two centuries.

In parallel the collector moves in front of these so evocative little bits of cardboard: most famous of all is the collection of Roger de Gaigneres, which was documented when admired by a doctor in 1698. Gaigneres had a very beautiful Tarot set, said to be of the time of Charles VI. Later the Marteau family, the uncle and the nephew, assembled rich collections. These and others came to constitute and grow the Department of Stamps and Photography of the National Library of Paris, one of the richest funds in the world.

Let's describe some of the Tarots. In addition to those of Charles VI, certain exemplary rarities of the XVIIth century and one set of more recent games, all remarkable in inventiveness, feature and colour. Let's also note some exhibitions of Tarots which took place: 1967 in Bielefeld, in the Deutschland Spielkarter Museum, Tarots with French symbols were presented; in 1971 in Amiens, Jean Marie Lhote preferred to give importance to the poetry of the pieces than to their age.

1984: the exhibition "Tarot game and magic" at the National Library of Paris. Thierry Depaules wrote the exhibition catalogue. Professors Michael Dumett of the University of Oxford and Detlef Hoffman of the University of Oldenburg are the authors of the preface and the introduction of the catalogue.

...For wrong or for right, the tarot fascinates people. One of these reasons: an ordinary game of cards contains 12 figures. A game of Tarot possesses 22 (21 and 0), offering therefore a fabulous opportunity for the talent of artists and card-makers. Whether they act as paintings of the Italian Renaissance laminated onto sumptuous cards reserved for princes or are of modern fabrication, amateurs of the game, whoever they are, appreciate the finesses and the great variety of possibilities offered by the rules which come in a straight line from Northern Italy in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Certain of these rules, like the principle of the game of "tricks", entered Europe with the cards themselves, from the Muslim world. Other principles, on the other hand, like "trump cards", are European inventions, produced in the princely courts of Northern Italy. Let's note also a similar game to Tarot, the very popular German game: Karnoffel.

... The images of the Tarot cards represent allegories which are enigmas for us but which would have been familiar to people in the Renaissance.

Many theories have been invented for explaining the iconography of these cards: the imagery of Tarots consists of a mixing of different civilizations and popular traditions. It acts as a crossing of influences, cultures, traditions, history and philosophy (notably Humanism).

Let's note here the example of the legend of the Papesse Jeanne in the illustrations of 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century books which we rediscover in the illustrations of Tarot cards. Also, the example of Petrarque who, moved by the idea of the triumphant procession, wrote the poem *Triumphes* (1352-1357). In this poem we meet images of Death, Chariot? or of Love which one finds also in the images of the Tarot.

... Often the theories have tried to explain the iconography of the Tarot Cards in association with the Occult. There is not really a relationship between the symbolism of the cards and the usage for which they are destined. In fact the use of the Tarot for occultism and divination was hardly documented before 1784 in France, with the writings (9 volumes) of Antoine Court de Gebelin who is otherwise considered as the father of occultism.

The progress accomplished in the history of playing cards and of card games is often similar to the worthy methods of the detectives in detective novels: all rests on insignificant details which all at once attract attention, on hazardous but sometimes conclusive gatherings, on daring analysis to explain the inexplicable.

A comparative examination will be the best way to make new discoveries and to build new and fertile hypotheses...

(Notes collected from the exhibition catalogue of "Tarot Jeu et Magie" at the National Library of Paris, 1984)

### On my work on Tarot Cards

When I decided to work on the Tarot Cards, I said I was tempted by the variety and the depth of the ideas, of the names of the cards, of subjects featured as specific names: the Fool, the Emperor, Justice or Death, are some of the host of really interesting themes to work on. Most of all, the idea of having assembled into a pack such an ensemble of diverse themes / figures, so essentially different and yet so alike, since they all together form a single game.

That was my first idea and yet I know that what really was in my head, shaped under the curious "pretext" of a tarot game, was my attempt to prove throughout the context of a very concrete system (tarot cards), the absolute ambiguity of meaning, significance and possible definitions of each figure.

What better example than to choose diverse titles, to finally bring them all towards a common end? Because all these cards, despite their different names (Fool, Magician, Justice etc.) that differentiate them in terms of meaning and significance, share between them common essential features. My work on the Tarot Cards is mainly a critique on human qualities.

It is a work on characters and I should like to introduce you here to the "dramatis personae" of my work:

Characters	Qualities
0. The Fool	young, wise, dreamer
1. The Magician	magic
2. The High Priestess	strong, resolute, committed
3. The Empress	obviously royal, sly, cunning
4. The Emperor	young, proud, arrogant, unpretentious, sweet, cute, sly, cunning, handsome, foolish, charming, intelligent
5. The Hierophant	young, pretentious, impertinent, a trickster, a cheat, promising, ambitious
6. The Lovers	
7. The Chariot	
8. Strength	
9. The Hermit	a fool, committed, indecisive, sad
10. Wheel of Fortune	
11. Justice	strong, devoted, determined, resolute, committed, honest, loyal, reserved
12. The Hanged Man	hanged
13. Death	an ultimate host
14. Temperance	strong, reserved, devoted
15. The Devil	a poor devil
16. The Tower	
17. The Star	
18. The Moon	
19. The Sun	
20. The Last Judgement	pensive
21. The World	

#### 4. The Emperor

Who is the emperor?

The emperor is young. Being young, he looks fresh and surprised. In vain, we would call him naïve. He is not, because another quality refutes the freshness of his surprise: it's the certitude of his beauty; he dazzles himself; and yet, he does not love himself. The young emperor is sly. By his intelligence and knowledge, he poses when anyone looks at him. Ready to refute his wisdom, by a certain silly word from his mouth, like a frog who jumps or like the errors committed by Papageno and yet he shuts his mouth. Because the young man, intelligent, surprised and sly, knows he is the emperor.

#### 15. The Devil

The devil is a man who stands with his hands crossed. He does: nothing. Usually, it is us who succumb to the tricks of the devil, not him who takes us. And this thought renders him rather: a poor devil. (One of his horns - ears - is yet cocked: eventually he perceives a new trick on the part of man.)

## 21. The World

"...And cross to the other side you rediscover your comrades  
Flowers birds deer  
To find another sea, another gentleness." (Excerpt from the poem Amorgos, by Nikos Gatsos)

### Conclusion

The Magician is the only to be magic, unlike the Emperor who is young, proud, arrogant, unpretentious, sweet, cute, sly, cunning, handsome, foolish, charming and intelligent. The High Priestess, Justice and Temperance are strong. The High Priestess, the Hermit and Justice are committed. Justice and Temperance are reserved. They are also both devoted. Justice is also determined and loyal and among all the characters, she is the only to possess these qualities. The Emperor is young; so are the Hierophant and the Fool. But the Fool is wise and a dreamer, unlike the Hierophant who is a trickster, promising and ambitious.

Some qualities represent "ensembles" that comprise many characters. What makes a character defined by its own quality is either when he is the only to possess it (see the magician), or when one or more qualities exceed the ensemble of common qualities shared with other characters (see justice).

My attempt was to show what makes the difference that shapes every character into its own unique quality.

How difference can be discrete?

Finally, in my story, the Fool is wise, the Emperor is foolish and the Hermit is fool. Resemblance is not to be found in similarity but in difference.

### General Characteristics

Style: Greek sculptural effect

Predomination of white. No colour, except for black and white. The white functions as the reflection of light. The figures are lit from the front.

The number 5 predominates. That is to say, face, hands, legs. That is to say, effort, for:

1. rendering the difference of each facial expression;
2. effort for rendering the expressivity of the hands;
3. effort for rendering the plasticity of the legs.

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